

Tell them we are rising

An ethnographic study of the Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida

by Jerry E. Fluellen Jr.

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**“You have to be prepared for change,” says Santiago.
Paulo Coelho The Alchemist**

Abstract

On the weekend of December 13, 2008, 4,000 House Meetings in our nation convened to plan service events. In Jacksonville, Florida, four such House Meetings were held. Of the four, two became official links in Organizing for America, President Obama's grassroots organization. Of the two, one strove to become a learning organization. At the heart of The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida (OFN-JAX), is an example of education outside of school. This network of Jacksonville leaders engaged systematic workshops embedded in monthly House Meetings to learn Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework for learning organizations. Also, the organization created teams to carry out strategic actions guided by a shared vision. Thus, this ethnographic story tells how a group of 2008 campaign volunteers for President Obama transformed into people preparing for the 2012 presidential campaign.

Background

Rare is the study of a community organization made of campaign volunteers. But that becomes an opportunity to learn more about how an organization, outside of places of employment and schools, can start from scratch with Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework and engage systematic professional development for leaders with an eye on being well prepared for the 2012 Presidential election. How does such a diverse group transform from people carrying out tasks directed from campaign leaders above to a self sustaining organization? The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida (OFN-JAX) becomes an example of what Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer calls "the psychology of possibility." The fact that a group striving to become a learning organization is here means another can be created once we know the story.

Drawn from coded fieldnotes of its first five monthly House Meetings, the research problem for ethnographic study is as follows: How does a group of volunteers for President Obama's 2008 campaign become a learning organization? Peter Senge, MIT professor and author of the fifth discipline framework, says a learning organization is one in which **"people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."**

Members have been systematically engaging workshops on Senge's framework since its inception December 13, 2008. By the ninth House Meeting September 19, 2009 several members had also engaged a leadership think tank and a strategic planning session during the summer while the organization had been on recess. The think tank focused on in depth understanding of Peter Senge's concept of learning organization. So by House Meeting 9 October 17, 2009, OFN-JAX had a critical mass of members who had completed the think tank. Also, eight leaders participated in a strategic planning session. They proposed teams that would, in turn, create events or activities in health care, political action, education and energy/economics.

Was OFN-JAX starting to act as a learning organization? Were people expanding capacities? Were they engaging new and expansive patterns of thinking? Were collective aspirations set free? Were members learning how to learn together? Early findings suggest that some members were at least knowledgeable about the concept of learning organization. The participants in the think tank on July 11, 2009 examined the concept "learning organization" and wrote responses for two thought demanding tasks. Consider the blog entry for Organizing for America—the national grassroots organization of which the organization is a charter member.

Blog: Leadership Think Tank

July 11, 2009 marked a new day for The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville (OFN-JAX). Eight leaders in the network completed a three hour professional development think tank on the core concept in Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework. While each monthly House Meeting for OFN-Jax would feature a one hour workshop to explore a core concept in the five disciplines (personal mastery, shared vision, systems thinking, mental models, and team learning), this think tank took time to examine the very concept of learning organization itself. Leaders constructed an individual and collective understanding of learning organization while the membership was on summer recess.

In addition to listening to a 10 minute clip from Senge's audio book on the fifth discipline framework for learning organizations, practicing a 20 minute co-generative dialogue activity, and examining the concept critically in a power point slide show, leaders wrote about the learning organization and engaged six steps for creating one. The writing prompt was this: How do we become a learning organization?

One leader made a list of 11 characteristics of a learning organization including "leverage multiple perspectives, skills, ideas and goal," "discuss possibilities" and "respect all voices," record our history, progress, and accomplishments" and, finally, "connect thoughts and themes to institutional actions." Another member wrote, "we become a learning organization by keeping open minds. We respect other view-points in order to incorporate a variety of ideas into the organization. We focus our principles, purpose, and values in order to keep on track. We do not allow the organization to become stagnant or rigid. We remain nurturing and supportive of creative thought, ideas, and actions."

Another leader wrote, "we express our thoughts freely and respect each other's ideas. We discuss our collective thoughts, mold them into collective aspiration and, then, act on them with one voice. If we do this every time we meet, we will evolve into the type of learning organization we desire."

Finally, a leader wrote, "We become a learning organization through our collective willingness to think new and see new. We value each member and all ideas. We rid ourselves of fear and work to increase individual and collective capacities. We teach and learn. We connect through meaningful dialogue."

Because the group of leaders participating in the think tank became a critical mass to help the membership evolve into a practicing learning organization, the activity for creating a learning organization was key. Like connecting pieces of a puzzle, each leader responded to the six steps given in Peter Senge's fieldbook for the fifth discipline. A completed puzzle emerged from this effort.

Step one: If I had a learning organization...

People would commit to learning, teaching, and doing. People would have fun. People would start with a blank slate. People would have common values and goals. They would work together to serve others. They would share a common vision. We would listen to each other. People would come with energy. They would feel valued and loved. People would give and grow, serve and reflect.

Step two: enhancing the definition of learning organization

People will build a vision, seek knowledge, and share ideas. People feel they are doing things that matter to them. People are more intelligent together than they are alone.

Step three: what would a learning organization bring me...?

If we became a learning organization, we would commit to intellectual engagement and service to others. We will be changed for the better. We would try new thinking. We would create together. We would change from the inside out and grow new capacities. People would feel they are doing something that mattered to them personally and to the larger world. No one would be killed for making a mistake. People would be free to inquire. I will be empowered. I will not be afraid to not know. I will learn. I will be enriched in my service. Every person in the organization is stretching and enhancing capacities to create. People would share a vision. People would gain a sense of belonging to a great organization. Each member could say, "I am strong, smart, and creative."

Step four: picking and refining the top five characteristics of a learning organization

Perhaps the most important characteristic emerging from the puzzle on learning organizations for the participating leaders was “shared vision.” So many ideas fold into that one concept which happens to be the next of the five disciplines the overall organization will study when we resume in the fall. Additionally, John Naisbitt’s idea that the new basic skills of the 21st century were thinking, learning, and creating speaks to themes emerging from the collective response of OFN-JAX leaders. In brief, we seem to agree that in learning organizations, people think, learn, and create. As importantly, people create a shared vision.

Step five: what stands in our way...

Collectively, we identified several barriers to becoming a learning organization. These included fear, time, and energy. One leader said we should not take on too much. Another leader said old ways of thinking could stand in our way of becoming a learning organization. Still another said we could fail to listen.

Step 6: I’ll know we’re making progress towards becoming a learning organization if...a cohesive and productive organization still exists, if a plan to move forward is in place, if we become sustainable. One leader summed this evaluative step as follows: If we “continue to gather and communicate, nurture and listen, include and conclude,” we will be a learning organization.

In all, like the African proverb “when one begins a conversation, one cannot see the end,” the eight participants created a conversation about learning organizations. Were they the critical mass needed to transform the group? One month later, the same team met with Deirdre Johnson to plan, events, strategically, for the coming year and beyond. In this meeting, the set of leaders from had a chance to plan a tentative direction for the organization. They had a chance to “learn together.”

Strategic planning

August 22, 2009 at the University Park Branch Library, a team of leaders reached consensus that four events will be featured every quarter, every year. These events were to correspond with four thematic areas, three of which drew directly from President Obama’s pillars of our future economy: health care, education, energy. The fourth area was political action. That meant the leadership team elected to deal with themes of national concern and to do so every three months in ways that engaged the community. Phillip Miner, who had taken the time to write and distribute a skeleton plan drafting the four themes, suggested political action as a new direction for the organization. Until now individuals from OFN-JAX have been involved (e.g. eight members serve on the Duval County Democratic Executive Committee, several support local, state, and national campaigns, but the organization as a whole did not explicitly engage the public in the political process during its first nine months of life.

Almost by accident and to its credit, the organization did an activity during a House Party held to honor President Obama’s first 100 days. Participants in the party responded to two questions posted on huge post-its. One question asked: What has President Obama accomplished during his first 100 days? Another question asked: What should President Obama do during his next 100 days? Responses were incorporated into fieldnotes and made part of the historical record as well sent to President Obama via whitehouse.gov. In the midst of doing the electric slide, eating, laughing, and talking with people at 2016 University Blvd North, a 2008 National Campaign staging location for the last three weeks of the presidential election, OFN-JAX engaged the public in the political process through activities during a House Party. Such future social events might become an opportunity for education as well.

But to the point, Phillip's four themes created a skeleton upon which to invite strategic participation in years to come. Thus, the 2009-2010 calendars of events might include each quarter an event around one of the themes: health care, education, energy, political process. With a plan in place to present at House Meeting 8, September 19, 2009, all four themes are likely to become strategic action areas of the work if the general body agrees. Each of these teams will foster the development of leadership. Also, it will provide prior knowledge of team learning when members reach that point in the study of Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework. Finally, each of the themes relate to the tentative strategic vision as follows: "Prepare leaders for the 2012 Presidential campaign."

Less obvious than the co-created themes were the ways the planning session marked a new stage in development as a learning organization. Deirdre opened the meeting with our standing South African greeting "Sawu bona." Participants responded "Sikhona." Translated, Deirdre said, "I see you," and the participants replied, "I am here." In that brief exchange, people recognized one another as people. In Peter Senge's view, this recognition of personhood is the mark of a learning organization. Then, the group formed a prayer circle, holding hands and saying a prayer for the work of the day. Next, Jerry Fluellen led the group in a Qi Gong exercise to circulate chi in each person's body as well as the group's. Participants had a chance to experience silence—often a pathway to cosmic consciousness.

Inside the strategic planning session

Daryl Sherman started off the check in game. Deirdre Johnson had asked each leader to say something about why he or she was at the planning session. Then, after each participant checked in, Ingrid Fluellen narrated a power point slide show to summarize the history of OFN-JAX in its first nine months of life. Based on fieldnotes for seven House Meetings, reflections on two of three service projects, documents from a leadership think tank, and several blogs in the Organizing for America web site, we now know the organization is in the business of creating events and knowledge.

Jerry facilitated a 10 minute co-generative dialogue allowing the group to exchange different views of the history and possible new directions. All this, set the table for Deirdre's facilitation of the planning session. The discussion that followed illustrated Senge's view of dialogue featuring honest disagreements and creativity born from the honest differences. The group (Annette Boddie, Deborah Brill, Ingrid Fluellen, Jerry Fluellen, Phillip Miner, Daryl Sherman, Deirdre Johnson, Vivienne Courseault and Patricia Turrentine) successfully created a draft strategic plan to present at the September House Meeting. The new season began with people working together to create what they truly want—another mark of a learning organization.

Still, with more data to collect, the research problem can be more fully answered by January 2010. Fieldnotes from the new season September 2009, documents from workshops including the shared vision draft and final draft, and results of interviews—will address the research problem. Again, how does a group of campaign volunteers for President Obama become a learning organization?

19 September 2009: Fieldnote for House Meeting 8

House Meeting 8 opened the new season for the Obama Family Network of Jacksonville on September 19, 2009 at the University Park Library. The interactive, three hour meeting began with a welcome back from our summer recess, a South African greeting (Sawu Bona/Sikhona—I see you. I am here), the prayer circle, Qi Gong, and a check in game to share responses to the question what do we know or want to know about a learning organization? The 19 or so participants made several remarks as evident in the playback of themes drawn from their comments.

Then, our attention turned to the workshop on Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework. We engaged the first of four workshops to create a "shared vision" for OFN-JAX by January 2010. After a creative dramatics exercise to recapture the Spartacus story illustrating shared vision, we viewed a power point slide show to lock in place several critical thinking questions as well as to explore Senge's definition of shared vision. Then, we engaged a vision building exercise for a clip art picture and a quotation from Alexander Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. We addressed a set of thinking routines for the clip art and the literature: What is familiar? What is novel? Finally, we completed a quick write on one of the knowledge as design, critical thinking questions posed in the power point slide show: Why does OFN-JAX need to create a shared vision?

After the quick-write and listening to a few sample responses, we took a five minute break. The facilitation baton passed to three other leaders who guided us through an interactive power point on the history of OFN-JAX, an exploration of our link within the Organizing for America web site and work on our strategic plan to achieve consensus.

Finally, with group accord in hand, we divided into four teams for each of the work themes for the 2009-2010 cycle. In one corner of meeting room B, the political action team met. In another corner, the health care team met. In still another corner, the education team met. And in the middle of the room, the energy/economic team met. Each team had a representative spokesperson who reported the team findings. The teams will meet either face to face or online to continue working on their plans before the next meeting. Spokespersons will present progress reports. Our session closed with a check out game responding to the following: What has stood out in President Obama's administration? The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida will host House Meeting 9 on October 17, 2009 at the University Park Library.

To what degree did this House Meeting cohere with Senge's definition of learning organization? People worked together to create what they truly wanted: an introduction to shared vision; and, a set of teams to carry out the organization's work. They engaged new thinking and seeing.

17 October 2009: Fieldnote for House Meeting 9

“Sawu bona.”

“Sikhona.”

After our standing greeting to recognize one another's humanity, the facilitator organized us into our circles for prayer, Qi Gong, and the check in game. Our check in game took a new twist because instead of responding to a prompt, each person took turns reading one of the responses from the quick write activity in House Meeting 8. The question had been this: Why does OFN-JAX need a shared vision? We read most of the 19 responses placed on a word processed set of pages.

The responses set a tone for the second of four workshops on Peter Senge's “shared vision discipline.” We opened with a game requiring us to work together to achieve a common goal. The “whojaleepod” game had us passing around an object with a chain of questions leading back to the source who, in turn, gave a chain of answers until the “whojaleepod” got back home. Then, one of our members read dramatically an email from President Obama to the people of our nation. He called us to action. We responded to the reading with our views of what was familiar and what was novel—a vision building activity from Ellen Langer's mindfulness theory. At the core, the workshop featured a Carousel Game. We discussed four critical thinking questions then wrote answers on huge post-its placed around the room imitating a carousel. Then, members took turns reading answers aloud to the group. In sum, we explored the following: (1) How did Peter Senge define learning organization? (2) How does shared vision compare with personal mastery? (3) How has President Obama been creating with us a shared vision of a 21st Century government? (4) What is missing from our questions on shared vision? We are now prepared to engaged the Senge steps for writing a shared vision. At our third shared vision workshop, we will draft a shared vision for The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida. We will present the draft for editing at the December 2009 House Meeting (our anniversary). By January 2010, we will have a published a shared vision to guide our work including our four teams.

What's going on in Obama world featured reports from the four teams and a co-generative dialogue about President Obama's news release on accepting the Nobel Peace Prize and related topics. As a highlight of this session, we opened our cell phones and called Senator Nelson to ask for his support of health care reform including the public option. Also, most note worthy was Deborah Brill's work on our behalf. She established a tax ID and bank account for OFN-JAX at Wachovia. Ingrid, Brenda, and Deborah will serve as OFN-JAX account executives. Our check out game asked us to reflect on what surprised us in the meeting. Few of us were surprised about the highly quality thoughts and fun. Many of us were inspired.

Note that as a house keeping item, we signed research release forms for the ethnographic study. Interviews will take place at University Park Library on October 31, 2009 from 2 to 5 PM. The ethnographer will call each person to make an appointment. Our next House Meeting will be on the second Saturday in November instead of usual third. Thus, the date will be November 14, 2009 at University Park Library from 2:00PM to 5:00PM.

In a co-authored book called *Presence*, Senge says “all learning integrates thinking and doing.” This House Meeting illustrated his point. On the one hand, people thought more deeply about shared vision by writing responses to critical thinking questions. On the other hand, people took action on the health care reform bill presently before the United States Senate. Additionally, 100% of the members signed release forms for the ethnographic study, and ten signed up to be interviewed. In a learning organization, people “learn by integrating thinking and doing.”

31 October 2009: Interviews

Interviews provided insights about the group's functioning as a learning organization. Six members responded to a set of questions the ethnographer posed from an interview schedule. Each person engaged the same set of questions. But follow up questions were unique to each interviewee.

Deirdre had been a volunteer for President Obama as early as 2007. During the final three weeks of the campaign, she served on the office management team, phone banked, canvassed. She was among the charter members of OFN-JAX and served on the facilitation team. She felt OFN-Jax workshops challenged members to learn new ways of thinking. We are "free to think outside the box without judgments." And when we completed Senge's personal mastery discipline each of us had a "mission on Earth" and a way to put our "values into action." In Deirdre's view, one of the most important acts that OFN-Jax does for members is "empower people." And in so far as developing leaders for President Obama's 2010 campaign, she feels some will become leaders, others will not, but all will get preparation. Everybody will be valuable.

Tammy had volunteered during President Obama's campaign, but didn't join until October 2009. She found her first meeting to be "enlightening," offering information that can be "passed on to others." The meeting gave Tammy a chance to "voice opinions" of value to others. And we engaged "new thinking." "People want change and want to learn, to become more educated, dedicated, and focused."

Phillip began his volunteer work for President Obama in the Springfield office of Duval County. And his work at the 3100 University Blvd site seemed "like a job." For him, 2016 University Blvd. (which may have been one of the busiest sites in Duval County during the last three weeks of the election), became home. It was a place that "connected with the community for a cause bigger than just an election." "Change was the bigger focus." Phillip saw the need for "change in North Florida and the nation." How Obama Family Network expands individual values with the whole nation, the young, and with African Americans impacts on party building as well as campaigns. It "impacts on change nationally."

In our House Meetings, we "invite sharing", creating structure and vision." "By design, we expand, regularly soliciting input from members." We "save space" for individuals who may have been silent. And "dissenting voices are welcome." We clarify our direction and seem to know that a "minority view can be valuable." Because we intentionally listen to all voices, we are learning together. Creating teams in which "people can follow interest" will be a key to our growth.

Vivienne became a volunteer almost at the start of President Obama's campaign. She was one of the most active volunteers during the last three weeks at the 2016 staging site. For Vivienne, OFN-JAX Senge's system teaches us to become a group and makes you want to stay in face to face meetings. The House Meeting sets us free. In the check in game, we "feel free to say what's on our minds. "No one puts you down." We are learning together. The Senge workshops are like "glue." They teach us "how to communicate as a group." We create "billion dollar mindsets." We will be ripe by 2012. "Each one of us will be able to get our own group." Like President Obama, we will "build from scratch."

Among the hundreds of volunteers during the last three weeks of the campaign, Bruce had been one of the most ardent. He felt that "government needed to change." He searched for organizations to join. He helped the main staging site set up and joined the Young Democrats. He was allured by the intense activity of the 2016 staging site, and, thus became one of the first members of Obama Family Network when it formed December 2008. Bruce said, "I have a lot of questions." How to be proactive? How to get people engaged? "OFN helps me to satisfy my desire to learn, to practice new thinking."

At every House Meeting, we engage in "tools that stimulate minds." We envision a community that has a high possibility of success. We expect our nation to take on "problems of magnitude: economics, health care...uncharted territories in some cases." OFN is part of that larger community. As for preparing leaders for the 2010 campaign, OFN might but that is not necessary. 'It increases capacities of members whatever happens in the future.'

Ingrid became a volunteer early in President Obama's campaign. She started with phone banking and canvassing. Then, continued those activities while managing the 2016 cite. With President Obama elected, she co-founded the Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida. She said, now we are "transcending the volunteer stage." We are challenged to be born, to create new ideas with guidelines. I have witnessed the evolutionary growth from volunteers to people who create new ideas and capacities. "We are learning to get the results we truly want." Ingrid added, "we study the five disciplines" (of Peter Senge). "That is the tool we use to find out what members want."

" In our study of Senge's personal mastery, we identified core values and visions for individuals. " Members are finding a niche. "For example, Deborah Brill got the tax information ID. She empowered herself and us. Now we have an official bank account." As importantly, "I have developed the capacity to organize as well as be a team player. "OFN is becoming a model of responsible citizenship that leads to a sustainable democracy."

Our House Meetings "promote and engage new thinking." And I am more engaged in supporting contributions of time and talents." Also, "I have taken courses in campaign management, learning about grassroots to oval office." OFN members are involved: nine OFN members were delegates to the 2009 Florida Democratic Conference. We are active on college campuses. Our members naturally seek participation in meaningful organizations. We celebrate our intellectual capacities. "Because of OFN, we can go everywhere." Some of us will hold key leadership positions in presidential campaigns 2012 and 2016.

Like a thermometer, the set of interviews took the temperature of membership understanding of OFN-JAX as a learning organization. This temperature taking suggested that the organization is warming up to the task of serving Duval County Florida as a learning organization. It is bent on new thinking and new seeing. The November house meeting featured the third of four leadership workshops on Senge's "shared vision" discipline and provided another heat check.

14 November 2009: Fieldnote for House Meeting 10

House Meeting 10



14 November 2009 is one of the most important dates in the story of The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida. Almost a month before its initial birthday, several members created a draft strategic vision that will ultimately guide the organization the way the Constitution guides our nation. The founding mothers and fathers responded to a set of questions from Peter Senge's fieldbook. First, they explored the future: OFN-JAX 2014. Then, they examined the current reality: OFN-JAX 2009. Individuals answered the reflection questions, merged into three teams and synthesized individual responses. A spokesperson for each team reported to the body of whole. One member will integrate ideas from the three groups into a draft shared vision. At the 19 December 2009 meeting (the organization's anniversary), members will examine the draft with a set of reflection questions from Senge.

All members participating in the December session combined with the members at the 14 November 2009 meeting will create the shared vision of The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida. The draft will be refined by one member or a team of members. The final draft will be published for the organization in January 2010.

Also, on 31 October 2009, six members interviewed for the ethnographic study. These members responded to an interview schedule designed to elicit insights about a learning organization. The research problem had been the following: How does a group of volunteers for President Obama become a learning organization? Their input was invaluable for telling our story. The interview results will be integrated with the other data collected. Data collection will have included fieldnotes, leadership think tank responses, observations of the strategic planning session, written responses in the shared vision workshops, interviews, and shared vision drafts.

The next meeting will be 19 December 2009 at University Park Library from 2-5 PM. At this meeting, the final set of founding mothers and fathers will refine the draft shared vision.

Shared Vision Draft

The year is 2014. We have created the organization we most wanted to create. Our job as a team is to describe it—as if you were able to see it, realistically, around you. Consider these questions one by one, painting an ever-clearer shared vision of the future Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida. You will need a facilitator, a scribe, a spokesperson, and lots of brain power.

Those directions in the Senge workshop on shared vision led the three teams who answered the questions below.

- Who are the stakeholders of OFN-JAX in 2014?
- What trends have impacted on our organization?
- What does our organization look like?
- What are our core values?
- What is our unique contribution to the world around us?
- What have we done to ensure the future of OFN-JAX for our grandchildren?

Additionally, the directions said, “Now come back to the current year (2009).”

- What aspects of our organization empower people?
- How is the strategic plan currently used?
- What major losses do we fear?
- What do we know (that we need to know)?
- What don't we know (that we need to know)?

Four pages of word processed notes taken from three teams who had captured ideas on chart papers boiled down to this draft shared vision:

A diverse organization devoted to learning, leadership, and change, OFN-JAX empowers people within and outside of its borders. At the level of deep structure, the organization creates events focused on themes from President Obama's administration. Also, it creates knowledge. Thus, on the one hand, OFN-JAX consists of teams in political action, health care, energy/economy, and education. These teams create events and knowledge. On the other hand, the organization offers regular professional development. For example, Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework is the first study the organization has engaged. Senge's framework empowers the group to become a learning organization. Each member becomes more effective in leading and networking with other organizations. As members learn the disciplines of a learning organization and create new disciplines (in addition to the five Senge provides), they become better prepared for leadership and change. They become better prepared to include college and high school students as well as elders. OFN-JAX becomes sustainable.

That draft becomes the focus of a second round of examination at the December 2010 house meeting. Notes from that examination became the next draft—one presented to leaders at the January 2010 house meeting.

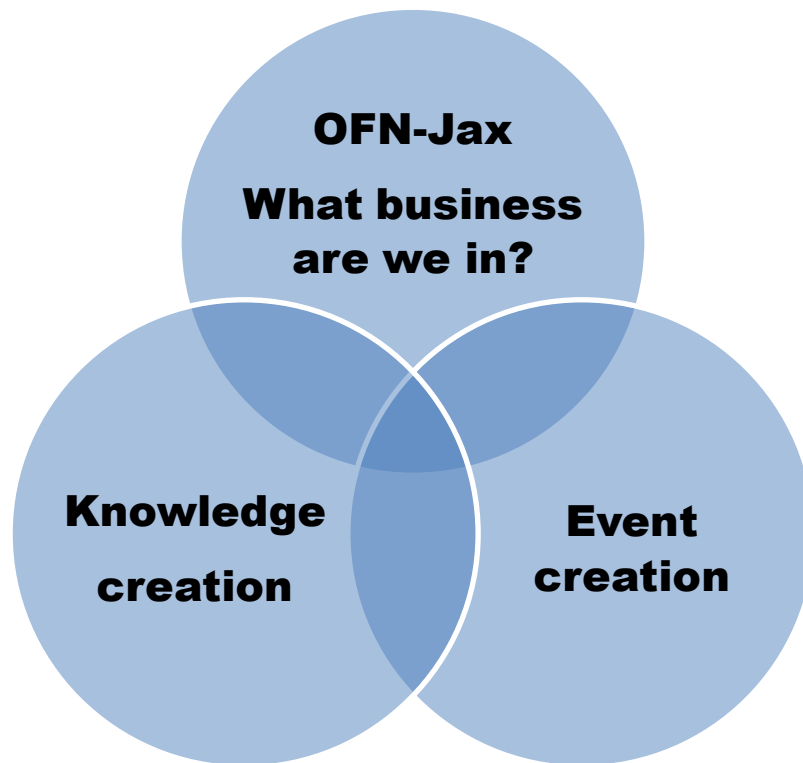
Shared Vision for OFN-Jax 2010

The Obama Family Network of Jacksonville, Florida (OFN-JAX) fosters learning, leadership, and change. Members engage professional development in such stellar ideas as Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework for becoming a learning organization. This systematic development of minds empowers members to change from within and leave fingerprints on other organizations in the network. Additionally, with an eye on sustainability, members create strategic actions aimed at solving fundamental problems in the key issue areas of health, education, energy/economy, and political action. OFN-JAX hears President Obama's call to action: make the world a better place for seven generations to come.

Shared Vision from Scratch

















OBAMA FAMILY NETWORK

Jacksonville Florida (OFN-Jax)



Reflection

How does a group of volunteers for President Obama's 2008 campaign become a learning organization? In general, OFN-JAX became a learning organization with the creation of a shared vision. That told what the group truly wanted to become. But the shared vision itself created a gap between what the organization is and what it is becoming. To think about present reality and potential reality four topics might prove helpful: (1) professional development, (2) strategic actions, (3) strategic reflections on actions, (4) sustainable value. (See figure 1.)

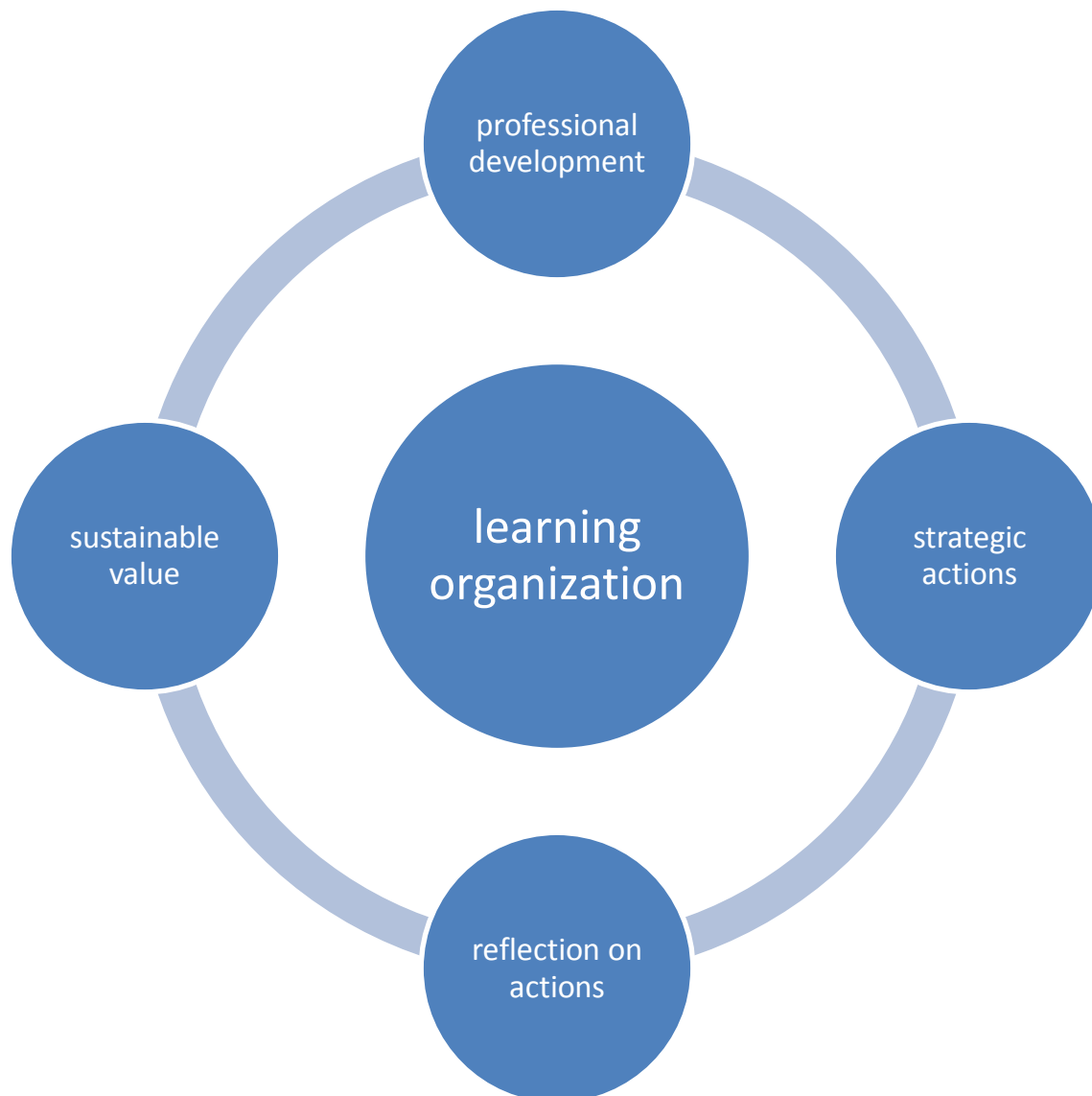


Figure 1

Professional Development

Right from the start members participated in workshops designed to expand understanding of Peter Senge's fifth discipline framework for learning organizations. However, only a few members attended the majority of the workshops. Typically, each House Meeting had a significant number of first time participants and a handful of regulars. Because the sessions were highly interactive, people said they liked the intense learning. However, often the same people exclaiming their joy of learning did not come back. Present reality, then, is this: OFN-JAX offers systematic professional development but less than a dozen members have participated in most of the sessions. This fact has further implications for the organization because there are three more disciplines to engage. How many will be around for the next set of workshops? More critically, can members claim to be a learning organization without understanding of the five disciplines (personal mastery, shared vision, team learning, mental models, and systems thinking)? Or do the faithful members represent a critical mass?

Strategic Actions

Observations of during its first year suggest that the organization has been in the business of creating knowledge and events—the embodiment of Senge's learning by thinking and doing. The Clara White Mission food drive was the first service project, and it included a reflection as a follow up. Then, the organization created a project for blood pressure readings at fire stations across the city of Jacksonville. It offered a Health Care Kick off June 27, 2009 at the University Park Library. Daryl Sherman, a steadfast member, organized and facilitated the kick off featuring three doctors and three pharmacists who informed the public on health care issues. A health care professional also was there to take blood pressure readings. Daryl conducted a reflection on the event at Organizing for America.

Ingrid Fluellen and Phillip Miner spoke about health care reform at the Florida Coastal Law School. They engaged students in a forum. But most of the work of OFN-JAX members has been as individuals. This has included working on Congressman Kendrick Meek's campaign for the United States Senate, facilitating workshops for Organizing for America, encountering training for political campaigns, supporting Jacksonville mayoral candidates such as Alvin Brown, making phone calls in support of health care reform, designing a prototype for 21st Century education and more.

Only recently, with the emergence of Phillip Miner's political action team plan to register young voters, Project Jumpstart, has the organization as a whole returned to creating events for the community. However, through the blogs on Organizing for America's national web site, ongoing professional development in Senge's view of learning organization and this ethnographic study, it is clear that the organization is in the knowledge business. After the final data for this ethnographic story had been collected, the organization has taken off. Each of the teams has been creating knowledge and events.

Strategic Reflection

Fieldnotes for each House Meeting have been the primary means of reflection in OFN-JAX. Electronic copies of the fieldnotes are emailed to members and posted as blogs on the web site of Organizing for America. At each of the four closing House Meeting for 2009, participants had hard copies of the fieldnotes for the previous House Meeting and one member read the document aloud. But fieldnotes tell stories without critical commentary. This ethnographic study is the first reflection to take a harder look at the realities of the organization. In the future, one gap to close is the distance between action and critical reflection.

Sustainable Value

In *Necessary Revolution*, Senge et al identify a four-way notion of sustainable value that offers a final set of lenses for examining OFN-JAX critically. These lenses tell the story of what the organization has been and what it might become. (See figure 2.)

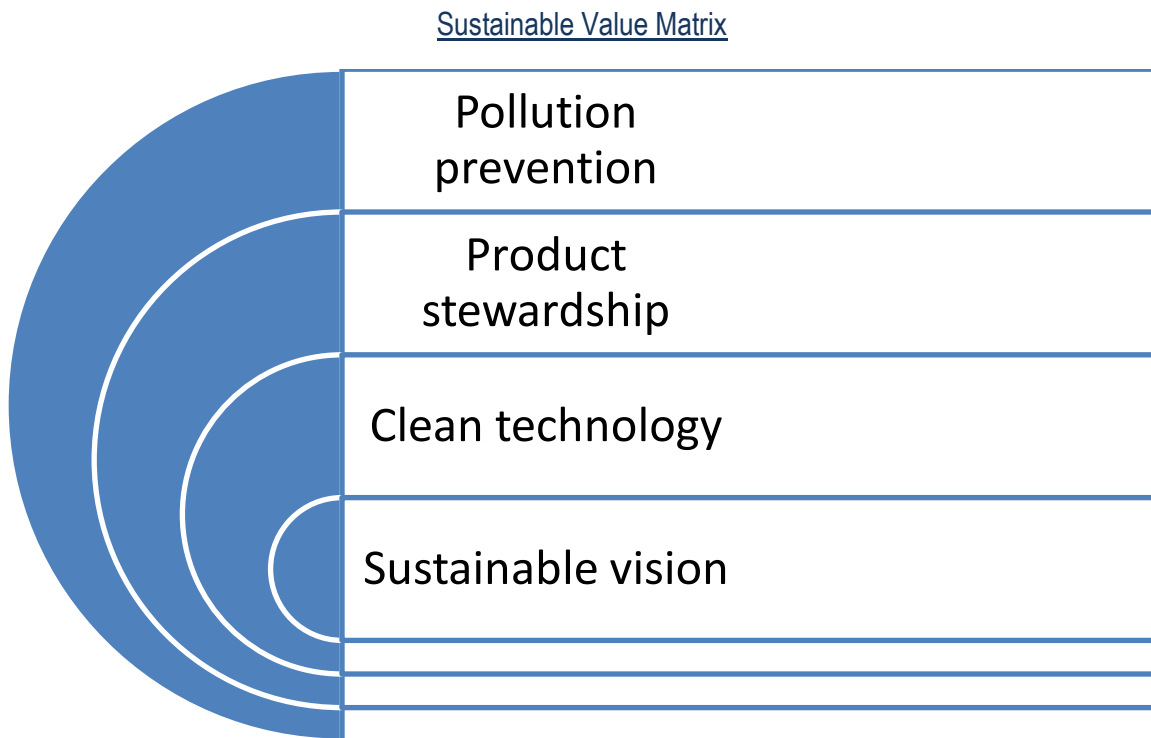


Figure 2

Pollution prevention

Without paying specific attention to ways of minimizing pollution, OFN-JAX began hosting House Meetings at an accessible branch of the public library. Because of its balance of high tech and high touch activities, the organization might be using very little energy. It will need, however, to think more deeply about its environmental footprint in the future. For example, greater use of social media might decrease the need for paper products in House Meetings.

Product stewardship

What are the intellectual products? The obvious products are House Meetings and handouts for the Senge workshops. For these products, members get hard copies at the meetings and copies are now placed on the Organizing for America blog site (when researchers use “leadership, learning and change” as search terms for blogs in the national Organizing for America web site, five of the 10 hits are from OFN-JAX as of January 2010). At last count, 47 blog entries are available for the nation as well. Most of these blogs have been authored by Jerry Fluellen and Phillip Miner. Finally, for 2010, the “shared vision” will be published on the storyboard for each House Meeting. Rather than one charismatic leader, the shared vision will focus the teams and activities of the organization as it strives to become a learning organization. These are all ways of taking care of the intellectual products. However, as the year unfolds, it is likely that Facebook will be added as another digital knowledge sharing and storage device as part of the stewardship of products. Other ways of taking care of our intellectual products are sure to surface. Already Alice B. Johnson, an artist, has created a logo. Also, Ingrid Fluellen and Deirdre Johnson have created a brochure. OFN-JAX intellectual products must be of high quality and cared for well.

Clean technology

OFN-JAX attention to clean technology increasingly will emphasize Frijof Capra’s idea that “waste is food.” Translated, that means that laser paper from extra handouts can be recycled in an ink jet printer for which publication quality copies is not a factor. It means some documents do not require use of paper. They can become power point slide shows or web searches on a large screen. Activities such as the Carousel game help members to synthesize team learning activities on chart paper and marker. It is low a cost, low energy, and high touch activity. Co-generative dialogue strategies can help members to practice core concepts of team learning and mental models. It, too, is high touch. Such a strategy requires only the most renewable fuel on Earth—human imagination. But as it is with pollution, the organization will need to think more about its carbon footprint and ways of reducing its impact. John Naisbitt once said in *Megatrends*: high touch must balance high tech. That can become a guiding principle for house meetings.

Sustainable vision

With this level of the matrix, OFN-JAX excels. The organization has a shared vision to create sustainability now and in decades to come. However, after one year of life issues such as the following recently surfaced: Who are we? Who belongs? Who will lead us? What do we do? Typically, such issues revisit an organization periodically. Just before the “shared vision” was published for the January 16, 2010 House Meeting a small set of members grappled with these themes once again. True to a learning organization, the conflict became an opportunity to learn more instead of a barrier to progress. A few members wanted to segregate the professional development from the House Meeting special business so that people can choose which activity to attend. But the professional development of leaders is how we strive to become a learning organization. Resolved: we cannot cut out the heart and still have viable body. We will continue to “integrate thinking and doing” as the way we learn, lead and change.

Conclusion

In the mind of the Honorable Andrew Young who took time to give two members a pool- side talk during the 2009 NAACP Florida State Conference, OFN-JAX is like a civil rights organization of the 1960s. He said no one at the time knew what impact a given organization would have on the world. Now the dots among Pan African Nationalists, Black Muslims, Black Panthers, and Non-violent Civil Rights organizations including the NAACP--all connect into a freedom movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed, Ron Karenga, Amir Baraka, Angela Davis, Julian Bond, Huey Newton, Thurgood Marshall and Dorothy Height share a common legacy that made the world a better place for children to come. But the tree of freedom under the sky still has room to grow.

Charismatic leaders gave us deeper roots. Now Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Joseph Biden, Jill Biden, Toni Morrison, Justice Stevens, the late Ted Kennedy, Cornel West, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi, Kendrick and Leslie Meek, Alvin and Santhia Brown, Alex Sink, as well as many other systems-level leaders in concert with Organizing For America, President Obama’s unstoppable grassroots movement for a new paradigm, will feed the freedom tree’s growth for the next decade.

Further Explorations

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Acknowledgement

We thank God for sustaining us during our first 18 months of life. Without money, we lasted long enough to support key candidate campaigns, fund House Meetings, and produce events in Duval County. Greater than 100 people participated in at least one House Meeting. Several hundred people participated in one of the dozen or so events OFN-Jax created for citizens of North Florida. An unknown number of people read the blogs in Organizing for America's web site. And we conducted an ethnographic study to tell our story. With feedback from Geraldine Green, Deirdre Johnson, and Phillip Miner plus editing from Ingrid Fluellen, this study is offered to the Glory of God. May God continue to be a lamp unto our feet.